DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 900 PS 031 653

AUTHOR	Hall, Georgia
TITLE	Promising Practices in Citywide Afterschool Initiatives. CityWorks: Focus on Infrastructure.
INSTITUTION	Wellesley Coll., MA. National Inst. on Out-of-School Time.
SPONS AGENCY	Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Flint, MI.
PUB DATE	2002-10-00
NOTE	8p.; Volume 1, Brief 1.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481. Tel: 781-283-2547; Fax: 781-283-3657; Web site: http://www.NIOST.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	*After School Education; *After School Programs; Partnerships in Education; Program Descriptions; *Public Relations; *Urban Programs; Urban Schools; *Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Sustainability

ABSTRACT

This brief is the first in a series featuring promising practices in city-wide after-school initiatives, with a focus at the infrastructure level, focusing on the infrastructure representing the underlying elements or framework that hold a system or initiative together. The brief identifies practices to support the public relations function and sustainability of after-school programming, a key task for any citywide after-school initiative. The brief identifies four essential elements of image building: determining a research and data collection process, identifying the appropriate media and messenger, understanding the initiative's internal identity and the external/stakeholder climate, and instituting systemic activities to sustain the public relations function. The experiences of Los Angeles' Better Education Students for Tomorrow (BEST) city-wide after-school initiatives are highlighted to illustrate the challenges and possibilities facing programs as they craft a public image that moves the local youth development agenda and supports the longevity of program investments. The brief describes the initiative as having invested considerable effort to create and sustain a strong public relations and public awareness infrastructure through development of a board of directors, strong external relations and a public informational campaign, and strong internal relations to create name recognition and pride among program users and internal stakeholders. The brief concludes by pointing out that the organizers of BEST had the foresight to anticipate the value of a strong public relations campaign and that their attention to building a strong infrastructure to support an aggressive and energetic public relations campaign has contributed to the success of the initiative. (KB)

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Promising Practices in Citywide Afterschool Initiatives. CityWorks: Focus on Infrastructure, Volume 1, Brief 1.

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October 2002

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CityWorks: Building Strong Citywide Afterschool Initiatives

CityWorks is an initiative of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) working in collaboration with existing communities that provide high quality out-of-school time programming to youth and children. CityWorks builds on the successful foundation of the "Cross-Cities Network for Leaders of Citywide After-School Initiatives" (CCN), which brings together leaders of after-school initiatives from 21 major cities across the United States. In bringing the experiences of stakeholders, service providers, schools, and community organizations together, NIOST can learn and share strategies for strengthening the infrastructure for out-of-school time activity. By sharing best practices of the CCN, CityWorks seeks to strengthen and enhance citywide afterschool initiatives and the communities they serve.

For further information, please contact NIOST at 781-283-2547

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PS 031653

October 2002
Volume 1, Brief 1

CityWorks

Focus on Infrastructure

Promising Practices in Citywide Afterschool Initiatives

This brief is the first in a series featuring promising practices in citywide afterschool initiatives with a focus at the infrastructure level. Infrastructure represents the underlying elements or framework that hold a system or initiative together. Infrastructure elements include all of the following: communication systems, public relations, leadership model, information collection activities, resource distribution, goal setting, sustainability planning, linkage to resources, etc. How well initiatives work and are successful is largely dependent on the strength of the infrastructure elements in place. Throughout this series of briefs NIOST will explore promising examples of infrastructure development that strengthen and support citywide afterschool initiatives.

Creating Infrastructure to Support Public Relations Function and Sustainability

Creating a positive and lasting public image is a key task of any citywide afterschool initiative. Public image can enhance or impede fundraising, program stability, staff and child/youth recruitment, community connections, and support long term sustainability. In an economic time when difficult choices are made by private and state/federal funding sources with limited dollars, a strong public image can position an initiative to be on the favorable side of those choices.

The public relations function is concerned with creating a favorable image among:

- Participants and families
- The schools
- The local community
- The broader community including financial stakeholders and policy makers

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Produced by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time for CityWorks
Written by Georgia Hall, NIOST Research Scientist.
This publication was made possible by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.
The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

Continued from p.1

Four Essential Elements of Image Building

There are at least four essential elements of image building that must be addressed:
(1) determining a research and data collection process, (2) identifying the appropriate entity to perform the tasks, (3) understanding the initiative's internal identity and the external/stakeholder climate, and (4) instituting systemic activities which will sustain the public relations function.

"Child advocacy groups have become increasingly sophisticated about using data to mobilize public opinion and motivate greater public investment in young children and their families"

Research and Data Collection

Not only is data collection essential, but collecting the right data is paramount. Both the public and policy makers want to know that their investments are worthwhile. Information on attendance, participation trends, links to school classroom and the broader community, and possible impacts on learning are themes that resonate with families and political leaders. Anecdotal stories can be very powerful but are not as transferable. Numeric documentation can travel across multiple publications, the classic news clip, be shared with legislators and funders, etc. Researchers note that "child advocacy groups have become increasingly sophisticated about using data to mobilize public opinion and motivate greater public investment in young children and their families" (Watson et al., 2000).

Coming to a data collection strategy is a collaborative process, which ideally involves leaders, program staff, youth participants, and families. Leaders in the initiative need to plan as to what data can and should be collected. There may be national sets of data available that lend to comparative study. Because of expected bureaucratic delay, data collection needs to be well planned and appropriately timed. Advanced preparation of tools and an "open" process in which all parties understand the purpose and intentions of data collection lays the groundwork for success. Data collection can't occur as a one-time activity, but must become embedded in the regular tasks of the initiative.

Identifying the Appropriate Media and Messenger

There is an array of media choices today from which to choose for promoting a public image, including radio, written publication, e-mail, advertising billboards, television, and direct mail. Stakeholders, participants, and supporters may be better reached by different forms of media so it is important to fit the media choice to the specific audience.

Selecting the right messenger is just as important as organizing the message. Citywide afterschool initiatives which include partnerships with city government offices may have already functioning public relations offices available. Large school districts, also, may have a public/community relations office. Other initiatives managed by intermediary organizations may elect to create a public relations function within their organization or sub-contract with a professional marketing/public relations organization. Decisions on media format and messenger need to be compatible with the long term goals and objectives of the organization and the resources available.

Self-identity and External Climate

As a public relations campaign is organized, it is important to take inventory of the organization's own self-identity. The organization image that is promoted has to be grounded in reality or the

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Continued from p.2

public relations activities will eventually fail. There needs to be clarity on the specific characteristics and strengths of the afterschool initiative. Similarly, a survey of the external environment should be done in order to know what issues are currently in the public's attention, what has been the historic relationship between education and the community, and who are the possible initiative supporters or detractors.

Systemic Activities

Public image building is a dynamic business process – an integrated process which is the result of many activities (Stanton, 1978). As a sustainability strategy for a citywide afterschool initiative, the process requires doing more than executing singular events. It requires a staffing and resources commitment in addition to organization energy, planning, and vision. However, the investment in infrastructure that supports a public relations/public image building function may be the linchpin to hold the initiative in place with sufficient support for the long term.

LA's BEST has subscribed to a practice of "doing things well" and then making sure people know you are "doing things well."

About LA's BEST

The experiences of LA's BEST citywide afterschool initiative sheds much light on the challenges and possibilities facing citywide afterschool initiatives as they craft a public image which moves the local youth development agenda and supports the longevity of program investments.

LA's BEST—Better Educated Students for Tomorrow—was an initiative of former Mayor of Los Angeles Tom Bradley. Since the program's inception in 1988, the initiative has proven itself as a sustainable and results driven afterschool program. Throughout its 14 years LA's BEST has maintained a solid municipal partnership. This partnership has allowed greater access to resources and a foothold into city politics and the city agenda. LA's BEST currently serves more than 18,000 students in 104 elementary schools across the City of Los Angeles.

LA's BEST Administrative Staff is split between the Mayor's Office and the Los Angeles Unified School District Office. The Corporate Office including the President/CEO along with the Chief Operating Officer, Director of Operations, Director of Staff Development, and Director of Education, is located in space within City Hall. The Deputy Director for Operations and Staff Coordinator positions are located in the School District Office. In addition to the challenge of a split administration structure, LA's BEST has survived three mayoral changes and five school superintendent changes. It has continued to be a successful program partly because of extensive and detailed public relations procedures and practices.

Infrastructure to Support Public Relations and Public Awareness

LA's BEST has subscribed to a practice of "doing things well" and then making sure people know you are "doing things well." Exercising an effective public relations campaign is not an easy task. In order to implement a successful campaign several key components are necessary:

- A staff person dedicated to organizing and promoting information to appropriate receivers;
- An understanding of the public relations culture of the community, i.e., what resonates with the stakeholders involved;
- A range of media choices;

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Continued from p.3

- Authentic documentation of the program accomplishments or success;
- An interesting and exciting message.

There are three organization areas in which LA's BEST has invested considerable effort to create and sustain a strong public relations and public awareness infrastructure:

- Board Development;
- External Relations;
- Internal Relations.

Board Development

From the outset the LA's BEST initiative involved key business, education, and community leaders. These leaders were brought together to envision the ideal out-of-school time program model. That group of individuals evolved into the first Board of Directors. Later the Board split into two functions – a Policy and Resource Board (called the Board of Governors) and an Advisory Board (acting as stewards of the program, with focus on program quality, continuous improvement, and staffing strategy). There are currently 25 members on the Governing Board including Presidents and CEOs of major corporations of Los Angeles.

Negotiating and cultivating the voices that dominate, whether they are political, sports, celebrity, etc., is an activity that reaps benefits.

For any citywide initiative the Board of Directors/Advisory Board must be seen as a critical arm of the public relations infrastructure. Formulating a Board of Directors is an opportunity to establish connections in the business and political community, and to establish access to resources through its members. By organizing a broad arena of support through the Board of Directors, afterschool becomes a central concern to many sectors of the city. The active fundraising involvement of LA's BEST Board brought unprecedented donor support to the program in 2001.

LA's BEST also has taken advantage of the city's celebrity population by cultivating support and spokesperson representation from well-known stars. While many citywide afterschool programs do not have the access to such high profile media campaigns, other strategies can substitute. What LA's BEST has done well, is taking advantage of the surrounding environment, whatever its strengths may be. Negotiating and cultivating the voices that dominate, whether they are political, sports, celebrity, etc., is an activity that reaps benefits.

External Relations

LA's BEST from the outset has had a strong external public relations and information campaign. The second position hired after the Executive Director position was a Director of Public Information. The main task of the Director of Public Information is to organize communication to all the different constituents, maintain consistently updated information, and to look strategically at future public and promotional activities. Staff have worked diligently to promote the accomplishments of the initiative by hosting frequent public events, by creating public excitement in the activities and the mission, and by perfecting the "news moment/press conference."

LA's BEST has built a large part of the positive public image on demonstrating accountability and results, beyond anecdotal evidence. They

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Continued from p.4

have measured benchmarks that would be considered significant in all arenas while incorporating highly reputable evaluators. The California Institute and UCLA have both conducted independent evaluations of LA's BEST. The results showed that students participating in LA's BEST like school better, show significant improvement in grades, demonstrate positive behavior changes and report feeling safer.

LA's BEST has strengthened its own position by promulgating accountability evidence with which politicians and policy makers can align. By becoming the "city's brag" LA's BEST is able to cultivate political representation and support at all layers of political representation. The frequent all program/all citywide events not only unite the participants and families, but present opportunities for stakeholders and policymakers to show public support of the afterschool vision.

Building the program's internal image is just as important as building the external image.

The external public relations campaign at LA's BEST is fueled by the presence of a strong leader at the CEO position. The advantage of having an aggressive, visionary, communicative, and organized leadership style in the CEO position cannot be overstated. Strong organization leadership and attention to the public image has led to considerable program exposure through the U.S. Department of Education, the After School Alliance, The Los Angeles Times, Education Week, The Daily News, KTLA-TV, and a February 2002 visit from Laura Bush.

Internal Relations

On a recent visit to Albion Street School, there was a very clear sense of the program efforts to create name recognition and pride among the program users and internal stakeholders. A large LA's BEST Banner hangs in Albion's playground, as at each of LA's Best school courtyard/playgrounds. Twenty or so children at Albion, engaged in a drumming activity, sang alternating chants with the drumming. They chanted "ALBION".....then "LA's BEST."

Staff cite many examples of the organization emphasis on building good internal relations including professional support from supervisors, opportunity for the practitioner's voice to be heard, a visible commitment to training, staff structure designed to promote mentoring, and evidence of hiring from within the community it serves. Building the program's internal image is just as important as building the external image. Between staff and youth, there are over 20,000 users of the LA's BEST program. It's essential that the overall messages about the program from these individuals be positive. Affirming messages from the program users and workers creates the foundation for a solid public image.

LA's BEST's strategies for crafting a solid internal image include:

- Promote name recognition;
- Help participants to understand that they are part of an initiative larger than their individual program;
- Include voices/choices of youth and staff in the decision-making process;
- Bring staff and youth when possible to net-

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Continued from p.5

working events/conferences to broaden their understandings of the issues;
- Articulate and reinforce participant and staff successes through program and staff newsletters.

Responsibilities for these tasks are spread out among LA's BEST personnel and the corporate and operations offices. These tasks are regularly prioritized and are part of the infrastructure of the initiative.

Programs that experience the kind of expansion that LA's BEST has experienced are often challenged to maintain the comfortable and supportive internal climate usually associated with small organization size. Recognizing the increasing difficulty of communication due to expansion, LA's BEST has created a series of staff and volunteer guides to streamline communication, and establish uniformity in institutional procedures and policies. Program and staff newsletters circulate to share news and promote unity. Yet, LA's BEST has very clearly articulated its desire to value and promote the uniqueness of each individual program. While many materials, staffing structures, etc., are provided centrally, the strength of the initiative still lies in its nurturing of the individual idea or inspiration at the program level.

From the beginning organizers of LA's BEST had the foresight to anticipate the value of establishing a strong public relations campaign. External and internal relations strategies and board development activities have never been on the periphery. Attention to building a strong infrastructure to support an aggressive and energetic public relations campaign has clearly contributed to the broad and proven success of the LA's BEST citywide afterschool initiative.

Resources:

Interviews conducted for this publication:

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Nina Tatum
Director of Staff Development

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Stanton, W. (1978). *Fundamentals of marketing.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Watson, S., Squires, B., & Schafer, P. (2000). *Think global, document local: Using data and information technologies to move the early childhood agenda. Starting points: Meeting the needs of our youngest children.* Washington, D.C.: The Finance Project.

Other resources for information on Citywide Afterschool Initiatives:

Cross-Cities Network for Leaders of Citywide After-School Initiatives, NIOST
www.niost.org/cross_cities

Forum For Youth Investment
www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

Public/Private Ventures
www.ppv.org

Institute for Youth, Education, & Families
National League of Cities
www.nlc.org/iyef

Policy Studies Associates, Inc.
www.policystudies.com

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